

“*Midnight’s Budding Morrow* is a moving portrayal of God’s grace in the midst of tragedy and sorrow. Sarah and James’s relationship is forged in fire, but it is all the stronger for it. This second installment in the Regency Wallflowers series has a message of redemption and forgiveness which is sure to resonate with readers of inspirational romance.”

—ALISSA BAXTER, author of *The Earl’s Lady Geologist*

“What a rich, lovely atmosphere! A crumbling estate that shelters a crumbling family is the backdrop to this story of unlikely love. A reserved yet resourceful young woman slips quietly into a muddled household, hoping desperately to one day belong—especially where it concerns her roguish husband, who isn’t such a rogue anymore. For all the darkness and shadowy corridors in this novel, hope and surprising tenderness grace the pages. Fans of Julie Klassen and Abigail Wilson will delight in this newest offering from Regency favorite Carolyn Miller.”

—JOANNA DAVIDSON POLITANO, author of *A Midnight Dance*

“Miller takes the reader on a journey of poignancy and hope as she weaves Sarah and James’s story, making *Midnight’s Budding Morrow* difficult to put down. I loved it.”

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“So wonderful! Sarah and James, from their disastrous first meeting, through their worsening misunderstandings, to their ultimate happily ever after, captured my heart and brought tears to my eyes. What more can I say about this amazing book? What more can I say except more! More!”

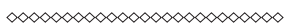
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“What a delightful read! Peppered with charming characters and the best sort of rogue, Miller’s latest captivating romance is rooted beautifully by the threads of redemption and hope. This marriage of convenience story simply drew me in and wouldn’t let me go. A pleasure to recommend!”

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Midnight's
Budding Morrow

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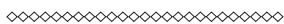
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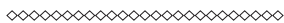
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Dusk's Darkest Shores
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Dawn's Untrodden Green

REGENCY WALLFLOWERS



Midnight's
Budding Morrow

CAROLYN MILLER



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To all those who dare to forgive

*. . . on the shores of darkness there is light,
And precipices show untrodden green,
There is a budding morrow in midnight,
There is a triple sight in blindness keen.*

John Keats, "To Homer"

Chapter 1

YORKSHIRE

1811

“Oh, Sarah, please. Please? What would it take for you to reconsider?”

“But I am needed here.” Sarah Drayton smiled to ease her friend’s disappointment. Well, her presence was not needed here exactly—a thousand balls could take place and she would not be missed—but at her aunt and uncle’s in nearby Hartsdale.

“But *I* need you more,” Beatrice Langley complained. “And really, why would you not want to come visit me? Am I not your oldest and best friend?” Her bottom lip protruded in a childlike pout.

“You are certainly my oldest friend, and you must know such an invitation holds a degree of interest. To be sure, I would enjoy the chance to finally see the sea,” she teased.

“I see. I’m merely a degree of interest, am I?” Beatrice asked, eyebrows aloft, before pleading further. “You simply must come. Langley is a little shabby these days, but it *is* interesting. And I know you would enjoy seeing a place which has hosted many important people over the years.”

Sarah laughed. “You are incorrigible, that’s what you are.”

“Runs in the family, so I’m told.” Beatrice’s lips curved with wryness.

A flicker of interest pulsed. No, she would *not* indulge in common curiosity and ask about her former school friend’s older brother. But incorrigibility and James Langley seemed to go hand in hand, or so the rumors said.

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"Dearest Sarah, you have no idea just how lonesome it can be living at Langley."

"Yes, with all that family, and all those servants, and all those parties you write about in your letters. I imagine it must be terribly hard, Bea."

Beatrice's blue eyes shadowed. "There is only Father and James now, and there have been far fewer parties of late. I'm afraid the place is falling into decay, so it seems overwhelming at times." She smoothed the pale-rose skirt of her silk gown. "Which is why I was ever so glad to learn you would be here tonight, so I could speak to you in person about such things."

Sarah's heart twisted. Perhaps Aunt Patricia and Uncle Loftus would be sympathetic for her to leave them to spend some time with a friend whose situation somewhat resembled Sarah's own.

"I will ask my aunt and uncle and see if they can spare me."

"Sarah, you are the truest of friends."

Sarah smiled as anticipation surged through her veins. To exchange the drear of duty to live in a castle by the sea? Who else would hesitate? Had she not prayed just this morning for God to direct her paths? Was this of His leading?

An older gentleman moved into view, his attention fixed on Beatrice, as had been the case all evening.

Not that Sarah minded. Fading into the background was her wont, after all.

"Ah, Miss Langley. We are honored with your presence tonight."

"Good evening, Sir John. May I introduce you to my dear friend, Miss Drayton? Sarah, this is Sir John Willoughby, one of our neighbors."

He barely spared Sarah a glance, the merest nod, a brief word.

Beatrice narrowed her eyes and drew Sarah's arm into her own. "I don't think you understand, Sir John. Miss Drayton is one of my oldest friends—we have known each other from the schoolroom—have we not, Sarah?—and she has promised to come and pay me a lengthy visit in the not-very-distant future. Isn't that quite marvelous?"

"Why, ahem, quite, er, marvelous, I am sure." His lips turned up in the semblance of a smile. "Anyone who is a friend of my dear Miss Langley is sure to be a friend of mine."

Sarah bowed her head, hiding her amusement at the man's pomposity, even as she struggled to discern the nature of their friendship. That the man was enamored of Beatrice was plain, but did her bright-eyed friend return his regard? It did not appear so. She would have to wait for a gap in this post-dinner conversation to make polite enquiry.

The two moved to the side in conversation, but Sarah remained by the pillar. With her unadorned cream gown and plain pale features, she would almost blend into the wall. Her attire was several years out-of-date, and she had been made acutely aware of this by the dismissive glances cast her way from Durham's fashionable and rich. Normally she did not mind, but tonight . . .

Something astringent seemed to have entered the room. Something that tipped her heart toward unease, toward a vague sense of fear. She shook her head, lifted her chin higher. How foolish. She wasn't normally one taken in by such fancies.

She glanced around the rest of the room, noting the titled, the wealthy and assured. There was Lord Danver, a peer in his late forties said to be abominably wealthy, his politeness to all evident in the way he patiently listened, even as his dark eyes seemed tinged with weary sorrow. There was Miss Georgiana Barnstaple, a fussily dressed blonde whom Beatrice had said was one of her blackguard brother's greatest admirers, "but he never has any time for her." There were other notables too, most of whom treated Sarah with indifference, unless it involved a raised-nose sneer at her clothes. Ah, well. It was a good thing she would but rarely meet with such people.

Sarah accepted a glass of punch from a passing servant as the couples assembled for the first dance. The music began, but her mind wandered from the melody. How best to approach her aunt about the proposed visit? It was not as if her mother's sister actually ever had any meaningful work for her to do, save acting as an unpaid housekeeper of sorts. And at Sarah's advanced age, she was certainly not bound by any duty save that of the familial, which Aunt Patricia had exploited to such an extent that none of the warmer feelings of family connections remained. Perhaps an appeal to her aunt's well-developed sense of economies might work: one less mouth to feed, one less person constantly in the way.

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Ears pricking at the name of Langley, she grew aware of voices speaking behind her.

"Such a temper I've never seen!"

"Gets it from the old man, if you ask me."

"Aye, that's for sure and for certain. How that lass ever got her sweetness I'll never know."

"They say—" Here the voices dipped in volume to make the words indiscernible.

Sarah's ears strained, wishing to hear more, even as she despised herself to be so low as to want to know gossip about her friend and her relations. She wrinkled her nose at her transgression and inched away from temptation, closer to the window.

A gush of new arrivals brought another man into view, brimming with vitality and good looks. He glanced around the room, features narrowing when he saw Beatrice and her admirer, and hurried down the steps to speak to her.

"Bea." He clutched her arm, drawing her a few steps away from Sir John and across to the window without apology. "I've come at last."

"Oh, thank goodness!" Beatrice's previously bored features now lit with an internal glow. She caught Sarah's gaze and motioned her forward, body angling in such a way that Sir John was excluded. "Peter, I want you to meet my dear friend, Sarah Drayton."

The man's green eyes sparkled. "Ah, the famous Miss Drayton. At last we meet."

"Indeed we do, Mister . . . ?"

"Oh, forgive me," Beatrice said. "This is Peter Grayling, a . . . a friend."

"A friend?" His quick glance at Beatrice seemed to hold a degree of disappointment. "Is that all?" he added in an undertone.

"All for now," Beatrice murmured.

Sarah curtsied to his short bow, heart alive with interest. Now *this* was more the sort of man she could envisage her vivacious friend having as a suitor. She peeked over her shoulder at the rumpled brow of Sir John.

He seemed to notice her noticing him and hurried away to speak to Beatrice's elderly father situated across the room. Urgent whispers and gesticulations made it apparent that neither man was enamored with

Beatrice's choice of beau, but Beatrice and Mr. Grayling remained caught in their bubble of mutual admiration.

Sarah sighed. The dance had concluded and couples were re-forming lines to prepare for the next. Near the door, Mr. Langley and Sir John continued their discussion, ignoring the two new guests stumbling their way down the steps, even as the shorter one shot the older men a scowl.

Who were these gentlemen? A few years older than Beatrice, of a similar vintage to Bea's beau, they appeared cavalier in their presentation, careless of their lurching movements that suggested they had imbibed rather too heavily before their attendance tonight. The taller one with blond hair seemed oblivious to the whispers behind raised hands, while the shorter, dark-haired man almost reveled in it, eyes taking in the room as if glorying in the attention.

He paused, focus fixing on Beatrice and her suitor, and he moved through the twirling couples without care for how his movements impeded theirs. "Beatrice," he pronounced loudly.

Definitely drunk. Sarah eyed him with disfavor. Who dared speak to a young lady so?

"Whatever are you doing with thish puppy?" he slurred, gesturing to Mr. Grayling.

Beatrice blanched, while Mr. Grayling's slackened jaw suggested he was dumbstruck. A glance across the room revealed Mr. Langley and Sir John had absented themselves, perhaps to find food. Or to avoid such shameful scenes.

As if sensing Sarah's disapproval, the newcomer turned to her. "Something to say, Miss Prim?"

"Prim?" Beatrice protested. "No, no, this is Miss Drayton, my friend."

His eyes narrowed. "Looking down her nose at me as though she thinks I'm spoony drunk." He lurched closer, a gold chain glinting at his throat, his beery breath igniting a spark of fear.

"Forgive me, sir," Sarah murmured. "I did not mean to give offense."

"Leave her," Beatrice implored. "Go talk to Papa instead."

"Father?" The man uttered a curse word. "Barely looked at me when I walked in. Too busy talking to Sir Pompous Jack O'Dandy."

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Papa? Father? Did this mean this man was—?

“Sarah, allow me to introduce my brother, Captain James Langley.”

The captain gave a mock bow, the movement tipping him to his knees, where he gave a great shout of laughter, unmindful of the humiliation of his sister.

Around them the music paused, the dancing stilled, the atmosphere grew thick with shame and ignominy.

“Cap’n Blackwood, get us another pot of Sir John Barleycorn,” he cried. “And a shovel of port for Miss Soursides here. She looks as if she could do with a good drink.”

Sarah blinked, took a step back, as his taller friend grinned and enquired loudly for two large strong drinks.

“Afraid of me, are you?” With surprising quickness Captain Langley rose and drew close, his dark-green eyes fixed on her, mouth a twisted sneer. “I’ll give you something to remember me by.” And in one swift movement he closed the space between them, his hands jerking her to himself as his alcohol-soaked mouth pressed down on hers.

She struggled for air, pushed away, slapping his cheek with a *thwack* that echoed off the walls, then wiped a hand across her contaminated lips as she stumbled back. “How dare you?”

“Sarah, I’m so sorry!” Beatrice hurried forward and grasped her arm, then hurried her up the stairs and into an anteroom, away from the shocked whispers and stares. “Oh, forgive me, forgive him. James is so lost he barely knows what he does anymore.”

“Has . . . had he done that before?” Sarah’s heart still thumped wildly. If only she could scrub away the scent of his breath, the feel of his arms, the shocking violence of her first kiss.

“He’s not well,” Beatrice murmured, evading Sarah’s gaze. “I only ask you don’t let this stop your visit.”

She shook her head. “I cannot stay at Langley House if he is there. I *will* not visit if he is there.”

“He shan’t be, I assure you. James is returning to the army, which is probably why he’s here for one last merriment before he ships abroad. How I wish I could make this up to you. You have no idea how sorry I am.” Shame and sorrow shone in her friend’s eyes.

Beatrice could not be blamed for her unfortunate brother. “You are sure he will not come?”

“He won’t. He and Papa do not get on.”

“Really?” The sarcasm was thick.

“I beg of you, do not hold his behavior against me.”

Sarah exhaled and slumped into a round-backed wooden chair. “You promise I need never see him again?”

“I give you my word.” Beatrice placed her hand on her chest. “If he does happen to visit, I’ll see you are locked inside the tower.”

“How reassuring,” she said dryly, even as her heart prickled. Beatrice’s castle had a tower?

“Please, Sarah?”

She sighed. “Oh, very well.”

She would not permit Captain James Langley to impede her one chance to grasp a new life. She would go as Beatrice’s friend, and pray she’d never see the scoundrel again.



The smell of alcohol and cigars scented the air, and a distant grumbling sound permeated his dream. James cracked open an eye. Sunlight stabbed, piercing the relentless thumping of his brain. He closed his eyelid, willed himself back to sleep. He needed rest, just as he’d needed to extract every last ounce of pleasure from these remaining few days.

The past nights of carousing seemed to have soaked into his bones, the nights of drinking until the dice turned against him leaving him head-sore and out of sorts. Drinking deeply didn’t mend the ache. Women didn’t meet his need. Reckless play might give a thrill of anticipation, but soon the guilt washed in. He was weary, unutterably weary, a broken stick washed in on the shore, useless, waiting, wishing for purpose, wanting futilely to be more.

James groaned, the pounding in his head drowning out the last wisps of a dreamed life he occasionally doubted had ever really happened. Some days he wished he need not wake. Some days he couldn’t believe he’d once been happy. That he had known a softer world. Until life had

shown that even the softest of people could not be trusted. Those days of happiness had been an illusion, a zephyr of his existence, a place he could never find again.

Nausea from last night's imbibing rose, and he swallowed, forced his thoughts away from the mistakes of the past and focused on deep breathing to gain control over far more recent ones. Why he had allowed Blackwood to convince him to visit that seedy club in Newcastle, he had no recollection. Or perhaps he had convinced Blackwood. Regardless, his body was protesting the excesses of the night, even as the sounds from the laneway outside insisted he face the day.

"Blackwood?"

A grunted sound stole into his ears, but still he did not open his eyes. He rolled to his other side, hoping it might convince the sloshing feeling in his stomach to settle.

Some days he hated himself. Loathed, despised, grew sick at himself. Like today. Two days after that insipid ball and despite the ocean of alcohol he'd consumed, it had only blurred the edges of his memory. He had still not forgotten that kiss. Her shock. That slap.

His lips lifted. Call him a scoundrel—join the long queue—but he'd been surprised by the forceful slap. Who'd have thought Miss Prim had it in her?

He supposed he shouldn't have done it. She was Bea's friend, after all. But he was never one to let conventions get in the way of the inspiration of the moment. When he'd succumbed to the temptation of his baser self, he'd expected to meet lips as lemonish as the sour expression she wore. But they hadn't been, and if it hadn't been for that slap he might've been further tempted—

No. James coughed. He must be coming down with something. He was starting to imagine all sorts of bizarre things. He was obviously suffering from a condition that could only be remedied by more of the liquid he liked to pour down his throat.

Another cough, but none of the wretched fire in his lungs that signaled a return of the fever, his reward for serving King and country. Only the fire of wretchedness that pulsed through his veins since that day near two decades ago, the day he'd never forgive himself for.

A pounding at the door matched the one inside his head. “Langley?” a deep voice called. “Langley? You in there?”

Lethargic eyelids now flew open as a hammering deepened in his veins. He knew that voice. Knew what that man wanted. The vagueness of last night’s drunken exploits sharpened into awful clarity and he muttered a curse. “Blackwood,” he hissed, pushing to a seated position.

The great lump of a man didn’t stir.

Head reeling, James staggered upright, tugged on his breeches, moved to his friend, and shook his arm.

“Whatsa matter?” Blackwood slurred.

“Tell Carter I’ve returned to London.”

“What?”

James gathered his few possessions, stuffing them into his pockets.

The pounding came at the door again. “Langley?” The voice cut like a sword between honor and self-preservation.

Blackwood was an army man; he could take care of himself. Besides, it was James from whom Carter wished to extract his pound of flesh. James hastened to the opened window, quickly calculating the drop to the ground as the great thumps at the door suggested Carter was heaving into it with his shoulder. He had but a matter of mere seconds now.

“See you in London, Blackwood,” he said, shifting his legs over the windowsill.

“London?”

“London,” James affirmed. “Until then.” He offered a sardonic smile and grasped firm hold of the window frame, pausing for a moment as the excesses of past nights blurred his vision and made his head swim.

But there was not a moment to waste. This was neither the first time he’d found cause to escape from his creditors, nor the first time he’d resorted to bending the truth in order to ensure his safety.

For to London he would go, just not immediately.

Instead he’d go and attempt to scrounge money from the old tyrant at the place he’d sworn he’d never return to. The place which haunted his dreams. The place which had destroyed his life.

For everyone knew there was no cause to seek for him there.

Not at the crumbling ruin known as Langley House.

Chapter 2

NORTHUMBERLAND

ONE WEEK LATER

“Not long to go now, miss,” the driver shouted from the bench next to her as they jostled down the lane.

Sarah nodded at Jem, the creaks and groans of the ancient cart permitting little more than loud exclamations to be heard. Never mind. She was busy getting her fill of the autumn-ripened scenery. The last of the common pink heather of the moors had given way to burnished grasses, and it was all so beautiful, so wildly fascinating. Her eyes soaked in all the glory now that they had left the rush and hustle of the city.

When the Mail had arrived at the Newcastle Inn, she had climbed from the carriage expecting to be met by a servant dressed in the Langley livery as per their arrangement, but instead she had been met with a hastily scrawled note from Beatrice. In it, Beatrice apologized for the lack of personal transport, assuring Sarah that the driver who would meet her was reliable, and all would be explained upon her arrival. Such a put-off only seemed on par for Sarah’s situation so far. Her aunt and uncle had been nonplussed at her desire to leave, unable to understand why she might wish to have an adventure and see something of the world rather than continue as unpaid labor in the dullness and drear of the cold manse in a tiny village at the junction of Yorkshire’s most northerly dales.

Now, anticipation mixed with a strain of trepidation. Would she be so unfortunate as to encounter Beatrice’s brother again? She hoped—she

prayed—she would not. She had barely been able to forget his actions that had left her feeling violated and soiled. Anger churned within anew. How dared he treat a woman unknown to him—his sister’s friend, no less!—in such a despicable, degrading manner? The man certainly lived up to his deplorable reputation as a wicked rakehell.

The cart dipped into a deep rut and wedged, throwing Sarah against Jem’s homespun-clothed shoulder. She murmured an apology and straightened, pushing her bonnet back from her eyes as a fine curricle approached. The features of the occupants—a young man and younger woman—were soon distinguished, and it was with a sinking heart she recognized the young blonde as Miss Barnstaple, her haughtiness as apparent as it had been at the assembly a week earlier.

Sarah affixed a smile. Would they afford her acknowledgment?

The curricle moved on, the gentleman driving seemingly oblivious to Jem’s pleas for them to stop and help.

“Well!” Sarah peered over her shoulder at the retreating couple, whose laughter floated upon the air. A groan summoned her attention to the poor cart driver below. “Oh, Mr. Jem, forgive me! I should assist you.”

She jumped down, and, ignoring his protests, removed her pelisse, flung off her foolish bonnet, and assisted him in pushing the cart’s wheel from the muddy groove in the road.

“Oh, thank ye, miss,” Jem gasped, his face red with exertion. “I shouldna be surprised young Barnstaple didnae want to stop, so I’m right glad for your help. But I’m verra sorry that you’ve spoiled your fine dress.”

She glanced down. The hem of her third best gown was coated in at least five inches of thick dark mud, a spatter of which now spotted her bodice. So much for wishing to make a good first impression. “Ah, well. It will clean.” She hoped. “Is the cart able to be driven now?”

“Aye. Hop on up, and we’ll be there in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.”

She inwardly smiled at the expression as she resumed her seat. At least she had a chance to compose herself in these upcoming minutes, as well as attempt to mend her appearance. The cart eased around a corner, through a thicket of elms, and she caught a glimpse of shining water.

“That be the North Sea.”

Breath suspended. “How beautiful!” Diamond glints twinkled grey

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and green and blue as far as the eye could see. She was used to the vast openness of the dales, of waving grass and stray sheep across barren fells and tors. But this . . . this was something quite different, so wild, so endless, so free. "I have never seen the sea before."

"You get used to it after a while, it be always there. There be some folks who can't stand the sound of the waves, nor the storms we see here."

"I don't imagine that ever being a problem for me."

"Now, as we go down this hill, take a look just beyond that tree."

She followed his pointing finger. All the air escaped her lungs, as a heart-deep tug accompanied the strangest sense of recognition, almost as if her destiny lay beyond the high stone walls.

"That be Langley House, or as folks like to call it around here, *the castle*."

She studied the great structure greedily, the round grey towers jutting into the sky against a backdrop of silver-blue sea, dominating the landscape, its authority and power undeniable. Tall walls topped with battlements led to rectangular towers closer to the shoreline, one of which seemed partly ruined, while another overlooked a small harbor.

"That further one be Lilith Tower, the other Egyncleugh. That means 'eagle's ravine' in the local dialect."

Egyncleugh. She sounded the word on her tongue. Ee-gan-cluff. This was a different world indeed. They reached the top of another rise, and Jem pulled the horse to a standstill. From here she could see the castle's reflection in the long stretches of still water: tall, imposing, grand. "Is it on an island?"

"Near enough. They be man-made lakes, *meres* we call 'em, with a causeway built between 'em. But on very high tides, the water covers the causeway, and it be island enough."

A tremor of excitement rippled up her spine as she studied the broken tower. "It seems perfectly gothic."

"They say there be ghosts that haunt the place."

"Truly?" Why had Beatrice never mentioned this?

"Aye. A chambermaid caught in the sea, and a long-ago relative of the current Langleys thought to have been lost in the tunnels underneath whilst searching for treasure."

“Treasure? You jest, surely.”

“The castle has been here far longer than you or I, miss. I wouldn’t be too quick to scoff if I were you.”

The churning inside increased. While she would continue to scoff at apparitions and the like, perhaps this wasn’t a wise idea after all. And why, oh why, had Beatrice never mentioned the grand magnitude of her home, instead describing it as a little run-down?

She shivered and drew her pelisse tight around her throat.

They commenced their descent, as Jem pointed out other landmarks: the nearby village of Langburgh, tucked beside the tiny harbor, with its small church complete with tall spire. The magnificent iron gates that led down a long drive to another grand residence, Knaresborough Hall, that was occupied by the Barnstaple family—the son and daughter of which had passed them on the road, Jem said. In the distance a silhouette of a tower was pointed out as the residence belonging to Sir John Willoughby, the baronet and local magistrate she’d met at the party, whose family had often accounted themselves as the most important in the district, according to Jem.

But it’s always been the Langley family who the village looked up to, he continued. They might not have a title, but they always had the money and the heart to care for the village. “Well, they did,” he finished uncertainly.

They did? What had changed? “And the Barnstaples?”

“Nowt but new folk,” he sniffed. “Been here for less than thirty years. Like to think they can mix with the old, but they dinna yet know it’s how you treat others that shows whether you are truly worth respectin’.”

She nodded, eyes widening as the cart veered from the road through a large fortress-like gate, with lichen-covered stone walls stretching for what seemed like miles. Beyond a few scraggy trees outlining the drive, the road lowered to a causeway, stretching in a straight line between the two lakes, the meres half filled with water. Stones clattered beneath the wheels as momentum sped their journey, then they were on the causeway proper, as the castle entrance loomed ever larger.

Her insides tightened, as if bracing for what awaited. “It’s awe-inspiring.”
“Aye.”

What a dramatic and intimidating way of entry, with its carved stone

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gargoyles and crenellations. Two imposing drum-shaped towers stood on either side of the gatehouse, the slitted windows like narrowed eyes peering out to see who dared come this way. A figure appeared in the second-story tower, and Sarah leaned forward to gain a better view, but the person retreated.

"I hope you'll be happy here, miss."

"I do too," she acknowledged. "Miss Langley has assured me of a warm welcome."

He cast her a swift glance but said nothing, and they passed the thick stone walls under the raised portcullis and moved into the shadows of the curved entranceway. Ahead, inside the great courtyard, an imposing square tower three stories high was flanked either side by long mullioned glass windows and Medusa-like tentacles of ivy. A scattering of other buildings, no doubt once used for all sorts of medieval purposes, surrounded the weed-infested cobblestoned square. Beyond, lay a number of other buildings in various stages of disrepair.

She bit her lip. Just what had she got herself into?

Ahead, a massive oak door studded with nails opened, and Beatrice appeared, followed by several servants, her obvious joy chasing away trepidation. "Oh, you are finally here!"

Sarah descended to give her friend a hug. "I'm ever so glad to see you. That was a long journey."

Beatrice's eyes shadowed. "I'm so sorry we could not meet you ourselves. Things have been a little topsy-turvy here."

"Mr. Jem has been very kind." Sarah smiled up at him.

He tipped his hat and advised a servant which of the items in the back were to be removed.

"Thank you, Jem," Beatrice called.

He tipped his hat again, and offered Sarah a friendly nod before steering his humble equipage out through the great gatehouse once more.

"Put Miss Drayton's trunk in the Blue Room, please, Robert."

A wizened male servant nodded and hefted Sarah's small trunk on his shoulders.

Sarah watched with concern. "Is he strong enough?"

"How many books did you pack?" Beatrice teased. "I told you it was

not necessary. Our library may be old and dusty, but it has many volumes you can enjoy.”

Sarah’s lips lifted as she looked up at the commanding walls, eyes skipping over the gargoyles that scowled down with such ferocity. “This is . . . there are simply no words, Bea. I never realized your home would be quite so, quite so . . .” She shrugged helplessly.

“It is rather spectacular, I’ll grant you that. But I sometimes wish I could live in a small abode somewhere, where we weren’t always worried whether the roof will leak or if a tower shall crumble during a storm.”

“Oh, to have the problems of the rich,” Sarah teased.

Beatrice’s look of amusement faded. “I am very sorry we did not meet you. It felt the height of rudeness, when you were coming at my invitation, but Father, and, oh—” She bit her lip.

“What is it?”

“You will despise me.”

“Never,” Sarah said promptly. “Nothing you could say could impair my good opinion of you. Now, what is it?”

“It’s James,” Bea whispered, casting a look around, as if she feared being overheard.

Sarah’s heart froze. “What about him?” she asked slowly.

“He’s here. He arrived without warning, gave us all the greatest shock, I assure you. Oh my dear”—she clasped Sarah’s arm—“I understand you may not wish to stay now, and I cannot fault you for desiring to leave, but I assure you that if you do decide to stay, then the castle is big enough you need scarcely see him. He is out today and must return soon to the army anyway. He and Father have never got on, and already have quarreled about the usual—money and Mama . . .” Bea’s eyes sheened.

At the sight of her friend’s tears, Sarah’s first instinct to leave immediately thawed. As disheartening as this turn of events was, something deeper urged her to selflessness and to stay.

What trouble could a man cause whom she would barely see?

Sarah patted her arm. “It is of no matter. I am here, ready to ease your boredom, is that not right?”

“Yes.” Beatrice clutched her arm. “Truly, you are sure you do not mind?”

No. But she sensed this was the right thing to do. “I have no wish to

let the unpleasantness of the past intrude upon my delight in spending time with my dearest friend.”

“I am so *very* glad you’ve come.” Beatrice enfolded her in a swift hug. “Now”—she led her inside—“I must take you to see Father, then I’ll show you to your room. It has the most splendid view of the sea, which I know you’ll enjoy. Then there are a few servants I will make you known to.”

The stone-floored antechamber opened into a huge dark-timbered hall, the high walls stretching to soaring rafters and a wooden ceiling carved into a multitude of medieval designs. High above, small leaden-paned windows permitted some light to alleviate the sense of gloom and highlighted a series of giant pictures positioned as if to guard the space.

The men and women were attired in clothes revealing the past ages, but in the final portrait a man and woman were dressed in more contemporary style. The young man resembled Beatrice’s father, which meant the beautiful woman wearing a lovely pearl necklace must be her mother.

“This is the Great Hall,” Beatrice explained, leading her past the stone fireplace, the dimensions suggesting one could easily roast a large pig. “Father is in the library, so we shall go there.”

Sarah’s insides tensed. From all Beatrice had said in the past, and Sarah’s very brief meeting with him a week ago, Beatrice’s father was not particularly genial or warmhearted. A retired military man—what might he ever have to say to her?

Beatrice pushed open a door to a red-and-gold-stripe wallpapered room, one lined with dusty bookshelves and cobwebs. A fire sputtered in the hearth, before which sat Mr. Langley.

She eyed him curiously. He seemed older, his face more lined, the thick dark brows and square chin the only evidence of his kinship with Bea. She smoothed down her pelisse, wishing it was less wrinkled and longer, and thus would hide the brown stains marring her gown’s hem. Would he notice, or be oblivious, as her uncle often seemed to be?

“Father, Miss Drayton has arrived.”

He grunted and glanced up from the book he’d been perusing. Her mouth dried.

His gaze was piercing and not kind. And most certainly *did* seem to notice she was not as precisely trim as she'd wish to be.

She curtsied. "Good afternoon, sir."

He grunted again.

Was that his chief form of communication? No wonder Beatrice had been so keen to have her here.

"I am going to take Sarah up to settle in now. I thought we'd put her in the Blue Room. It has such a lovely outlook after all."

He nodded, his attention returning to his book, leaving Sarah to feel as if she had been summarily dismissed.

"Don't mind him," Beatrice assured in a hushed voice, as they exited the room toward a grand central staircase. "He has not been well since . . . oh, never mind."

Sarah followed her up the stairs, and along a hall whose carpet was worn and thin. A sense of gentle decrepitude floated on the musty air. How many servants did they have? Were they all as aged as this house seemed to be?

"I wish Mrs. Copley would see to this," Beatrice muttered, lifting a dark-smudged finger from the banister.

"Is she the housekeeper?"

"Supposedly. More of a glorified maid really, but Father has always been reluctant to let the old staff go. Not when they are willing to work here for pride more than wages." Beatrice stopped, faced Sarah with wide eyes. "I don't mean to sound disloyal, but oh, if you only knew what it is to finally be able to speak of these things."

Sarah held her tongue. Having lived with an aunt inclined to cantankerous and frugal ways, she knew only too well the challenges associated with showing deference to one who seemed to scarcely notice such courtesy.

"Enough of such misery." Beatrice reached the second-to-last door. "Look, here we are." She flung open the door, revealing a light-filled bedchamber decorated in blues and cream.

"Oh my." The room would easily be thrice the size of her bedchamber at the manse, with its large four-poster tester bed and dresser. The

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rugs on the parquet floor possessed a similar hue to the blue brocade that lined the walls, and likely had been there for years, for both were slightly faded in places. Above hung a modest chandelier, which might not often be used, given the wall sconces held candles.

But the most wonderful part was the view. She hurried to the partly opened window and gazed out. Something within eased, soothed at the sight of the endless blue, the sun shimmering light and promise in contrast to the castle's dim interiors. Waves echoed, both on the rocks directly below the castle walls and on the small sandy beach a little farther on, their ceaseless susurrations a sound not unlike the constant winds over the dales. She closed her eyes and breathed in the salt-tinged air.

"Sarah?"

"This is lovely, Bea." She turned, grasped her friend's hands. "Thank you for asking me here."

"I'm so glad you came." Beatrice's eyes seemed to hold a desperate kind of relief. "I've been so worried, so confused . . ."

"About what? Bea, what is it?"

Beatrice simply shook her head. "I cannot say right now. Soon perhaps."

What mystery lay here? But any chance for further speculation was cut short by the arrival of the elderly servant with Sarah's trunk.

"Oh, thank you, Robert." Beatrice motioned to the corner. "Put it down there." She waited until he left the room, then studied Sarah's attire with a small frown. "We shall need to find you a gown more appropriate for dinner. What on earth happened to you?"

"The cart had some trouble."

"Did you get out and push?"

"It wasn't going anywhere with me sitting in it." She refrained from telling Beatrice about the passers-by who ignored Jem's plea for help. She had no wish to be uncharitable. Perhaps they had an appointment they were rushing to.

"It might be autumn, but with you here it shall be like a breath of spring, and we can certainly do with some new life to blow through this gloomy old place."

"I cannot wait to explore," Sarah admitted, with a return to her earlier

anticipation. This castle might be ancient and enormous, but it was also Beatrice's home. Even with the presence of James, Sarah would trust no harm would come to her here, no matter what those gargoyles might imply.

"There is much to see. But first, a new gown. Father may seem as though he doesn't care, but he can be quite scathing of those he thinks do not give him what he considers his due."

"You need to tell me what I should do to keep on his good side. I would not do anything that would cause trouble for you or give him reason to want me gone a moment sooner than you wish."

"Well, if it were my wishes that were taken into consideration, I'm afraid you would simply never leave!" Beatrice said gaily.

But something in her eyes made Sarah shiver in the cold breeze.



He was going to have to find another way. James dealt the cards and took a large swig from the tankard, carefully eyeing the men crowded in the small chamber in the back of the hostelry. If his luck did not improve, he would have to speak to his father again, see if he could perhaps unknot the man's miserly ways and convince him to part with some funds. It wouldn't take much, just enough to cover the three-hundred-mile journey south to London, with a little extra to alleviate the drear. If he could win tonight, he'd make some progress toward clearing his debts. And if he didn't . . .

James ignored the hulking figure of Falcott, Longhoughton's innkeeper, a man whose size and temper James was loath to cross. Fortunately, his absence from the area for the past dozen years meant he had been able to pass himself off as a mere soldier, not as the son and heir of a well-known local landowner, especially since he'd used Blackwood's name.

His lips twisted without amusement. *Blackguard* would be a more fitting title. Wasn't that how people—his father and sister included—regarded him?

His arrival several days ago had put the house in uproar, even if some of the more obsequious servants pretended to differ. Servants like Dawkins,

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Dawson, whatever his name was, who had met him with effusive insistence that he had been missed, and old Copley, the woman whose airs of self-importance had always sickened, who had greeted him with flattery he suspected as false. It hadn't taken long before the old invisible chains of reproach and condemnation had led him to escape outside, to seek freedom from the perpetual game of blame his father always played.

"You playing or what?"

James inclined his chin and threw out a card. His heart sank. *No*. He swallowed a curse. *No*.

Years of experience helped preserve his countenance, as he struggled to maintain an illusion of care-for-nothing, which was perhaps not such an illusion after all. He might be known in the regiment for his hard heart and careless ways, but such were mere means to survival. For what was life but a mere precursor to death? No, he could not afford to care, when life had proved that caring was just another word for heartbreak.

Another round, and he was forced to admit defeat. But this man was not one he could easily gull into believing he had the readies at home. He'd need to come up with another plan. "I'm afraid, gentlemen, that I have just remembered I have left my funds elsewhere."

"Whaddya mean? Have you no blunt?" Falcott staggered to his feet.

"I mean—" His mind blanked. Where were his quick wits and silver tongue now? Alcohol be—

Thwack.

He reeled back from the force of the blow, which had set his teeth to rattling.

"What's this?" Falcott snatched at the chain James wore around his neck, the piece he'd sworn never to remove, a memento to both his reverence and his shame.

"Don't," he pleaded. "It belonged to my mother."

"Belongs to me now." Falcott broke the thin golden loops from its dolphin head clasp and ripped it from James's neck. "Until you pay."

Until he paid—with what?

"Now get out of here," Falcott snarled. "And don't show your face 'ere again until you show the coin."

“But—”

Further protest died at the application of such force to his torso that he was left outside on the dirt wheezing, and conscious of two things. That the loss of his mother’s chain proved yet again how careless he was with important things. And that the sharp teeth of regret proved perhaps he wasn’t as careless as he’d liked to appear.

Not when he’d do anything to get that necklace back.